

Cosmas, John the Baptist and King David. Two leaden seals from Sigtuna, Sweden

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Two leaden seals were found in late 10th- early 12th century layers in Sigtuna, Sweden, in 1996. One carries the image and name of John the Baptist on the obverse and the Greek inscription, "Lord, help thy servant Cosmas" on the reverse. It is of 11th Century Byzantine origin. The other seal carries the image of King David and also, probably, the name David on the obverse. The reverse is unreadable. This seal very probably originates from one of the princes in Rus. The two seals, unique in Swedish archaeology, are interpreted as remnants of a looted or otherwise destroyed archive. They underline Sigtuna's central role in early Swedish history and the town's frequent contacts with Byzantium and Rus.

Introduction

Among the many interesting finds of Eastern origin, made in archaeological digs in the town of Sigtuna during recent years, are two leaden seals. They were found in July 1996, when excavating the Professorn Nr. 4 site, located between Stora gatan (the town's main street) and Lake Mälaren. At Stora gatan, the town's Viking Age and Mediaeval cultural layers are up to three meters thick, getting thinner at the outskirts.

The seals were found within a few days of each other, several metres apart, about 3 metres above sea level in a layer 10–20 cm thick, consisting of brown-blackish, peaty soil with plenty of bone fragments, mostly from pigs and cattle, and shards of Baltic pottery (black ware of type A). This layer was deposited on the few centimeters of sand of the lake's bottom, in its turn resting on sterile clay.

In the same excavation area and layer, many other unusual objects were found. Among them was a ceramic resurrection egg, probably from the Kiev region, pieces of ground porphyrite interpreted as sepulchral stones (consecrated altar details) possibly from Byzantium, shards from Byzantine ceramic amphorae, shards of Byzantine glass and bronze axe-amulets of a type Russian scholars associate with the princely retinues in Old Rus. Some of the objects were eroded by sea-water and the layer is interpreted stratigraphically and ac-

cording to the finds as a waste-layer from the late 10th- early 12th century (Tesch 1996; Edberg 1999).

The seal that was found first – which I here call the "Russian" seal – was in a bad condition with a blurred obverse and a completely corroded reverse. The second seal – "the Byzantine" – was in a better state with a fairly distinct picture of a saint on the obverse and an inscription on the reverse.

The "Russian seal" was X-rayed by Åsa Nordlander at the National Board of Antiquity (Riksantikvarieämbetet) and the two seals were then preserved by Margaretha Klockhoff at the Archaeological Research Laboratory.

After preservation, the seals were exhibited at the Sigtuna Museum. As they were completely new objects for all the archaeologists involved, for the Museum and for Sigtuna, I quickly skimmed some literature and contacted a couple of international specialists on seals. My work resulted in two articles, one in a booklet published by Sigtuna Museum for the exhibition, one in the magazine *Populär Arkeologi* (Edberg 1996, 1997). Only one of the inscriptions, the one on the reverse of the "Byzantine" seal, was decoded at the time. Both seals were then, erroneously, treated as Byzantine.

In order to confirm as much as possible of the inscriptions, Laila Kitzler of the Archaeological Research



Figure 1. The Byzantine Seal from Sigtuna. Scale 2:1. Photo (before preservation): Gabriel Hildebrand. Drawing: Johan Westerlund.

Laboratory later examined the seals with a no-touch laser scanner and a 3D computer program.

The Byzantine seal

The Byzantine Seal is 35 mm wide and 31 mm high. Its thickness varies between 4 and 5 mm (1). It weighs 33 grammes. Its general condition was good. During preservation spots of corrosion were noted on the obverse and on the edges (Klockhoff 1997).

On the obverse there is a half-length *en face* picture of a holy man, carrying a long coss sceptre in his left hand. His right hand is lifted as if for benediction. His head is surrounded by a nimbus and the whole figure is inscribed in a circle. In spite of the surface being very

worn, some of the saint's traits can be distinguished. The soft lines and harmonic proportions give the impression of a first-class artist's work.

Byzantium was a society imbued with religiosity. Ninety percent of all preserved seals carry pictures of Christ, the Holy Virgin or some of the saints (Schlumberger 1884:14). One seal, published by Oikonomides, carries a saint's picture which very much resembles ours. That saint is identified as John the Baptist (Oikonomides 1986a:84pp). The Greek inscription on our seal confirms that it is, in fact, the same saint. It represents in a condensed form one of John the Baptist's most frequently used names, Ioannes Prodromos. The text consists partly of merged letters i.e. ligatures. Other letters are omitted and must be implied.

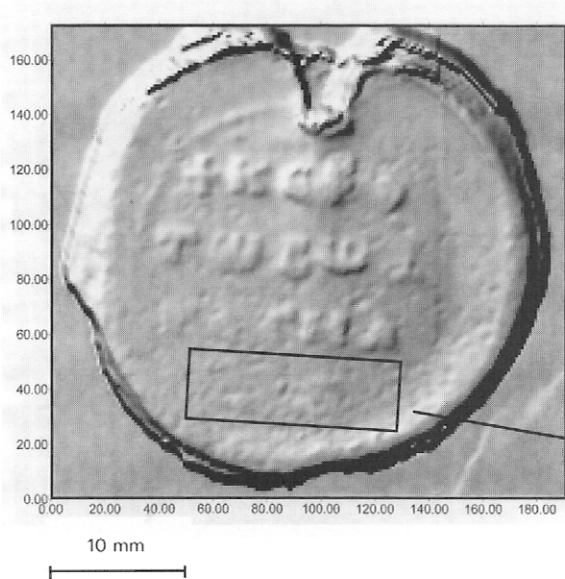
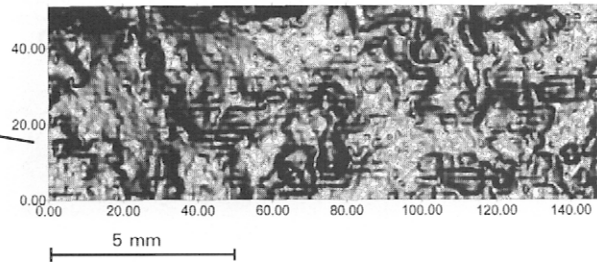


Figure 2. Scanning pictures of the Byzantine seal (cf. Kitzler 1998).

a) (left) Shaded relief. Measuring interval 0.2 mm.

b) (below) Topographical map. Measuring interval 0.1 mm. Isarithms 3µm. No structures indicating text or symbols below the main inscription can be discerned.



To the left of the saint there is an omicron with a dot in it (the dot representing an alpha) which is read as “ho hagios”, “the holy”. Below are an iota and an omega (the first letters of the name Ioannes, John) and still below, another omicron (an adjunct to the following word). The text to the left is thus read “The holy John (the)...”.

To the right of the saint there is a ligature with pi and rho, and below the letters delta, rho and my which are read Πρ(ο)δρ(ο)μ(ο)ς, “Prodromos”. Two authorities on Byzantine seals, Werner Seibt of Vienna, and John Nesbitt of Washington have separately scrutinised photos of the seals and agree on this interpretation (Seibt, Nesbitt, personal communication in letters).

The same condensed formula for John the Baptists’ name appears with some variations on many other Prodromos seals in the corpus publications (Schlumberger 1884; Laurent 1965; Zacos & Vegler 1972). Also Byzantine icon- and fresco-art offer comparisons.

The inscription on the reverse consists of three even lines, inscribed in a circle. Most of the letters are fairly sharp. The text reads, with the implied letters in brackets: +Κ(υρι)εβ(οη)θ(ει)τωσωδ(ουλω) Κοσµα, “Lord, help thy servant Cosmas”. Seibt and Nesbitt also agree on the reading of the text on the reverse. The words “Lord, help thy servant...” followed by a person’s name, were very common on Byzantine seals, a standard phrase.

Who was Cosmas? Byzantine bureaucracy was extensive and extremely strictly regulated. The seals’ owners generally had their titles shown, but our Cosmas is without title.

There is free space for a fourth inscription line on the reverse, but no inscription has been found there, despite meticulous, laser-scanner aided scrutiny (Kitzler 1998) (fig. 2).

The lack of information on Cosmas’ person leaves the field open for speculation. The name in itself was

very common. In the publications many people named Cosmas have been found but none that appears to suit our man. Werner Seibt looks upon the missing title as a sign that Cosmas was without one, suggesting in the first place that he may have been a merchant, as merchants didn’t have titles, or an imperial mercenary soldier – only officers had titles. Seibt dates the seal, on stylistic grounds, to the middle third of the 11th century but does not rule out a dating in the last third of the 11th century (Seibt, letter). The comparable seal published by Oikonomides, mentioned above, still hangs from its original document, dated 1042.

The Russian seal

The Russian seal is 36 mm wide and 32 mm high. Its thickness varies between 3 and 4 mm (fig. 3). It weighs 24 grammes. During preservation fragile surfaces with strong grey-white, porous outbreaks of corrosion were observed. In the cavities, red patches were also observed. This type of de-colouring may appear on leaden objects affected by limy soil. The red patches on this seal, and also to some extent on the Byzantine seal, have grown since their discovery.

The seal’s obverse shows a crowned figure en face surrounded by a nimbus. The figure carries a necklace and a mantle. The crown looks clumsy and the picture leaves, as a whole, a rather coarse impression. Thus, one may suspect that the seal isn’t Byzantine but rather “barbarian”. The delta (letter D), resting on a foot, is not Greek but rather cyrillic, which indicates that the seal is of Rus origin.

The crowned head and the D make Seibt sure of an identification of the saint’s figure with King David of the Old Testament (Seibt, letter). Below the D there are vague traces of one or more letters and also to the right



Figure 3. The Russian Seal from Sigtuna. Scale 2:1. Photo (before preservation): Gabriel Hildebrand. Drawing: Johan Westerlund.



of the saint there may be some sort of inscription (Kitzler 1998) (fig. 4).

People who carried biblical names or saints' names often identified themselves with their namesakes. In Rus, the use of seals was not in any way as common as it was in Byzantium, instead it was limited to the very top brass in society. The possibility that our seal belonged to a prince called or baptised David is, therefore, fairly great.

Among the seals published by Yanin in his 1970 corpus there are several that resemble ours, among these one made for prince David Svayoslavytch in Novgorod about 1095. The inscription on the obverse ("David") is strongly reminiscent of our seal (Yanin 1970) (fig. 5)

This David was, incidentally, grandson of grand prince Yaroslav ("the Wise") in Kiev, and his wife Ingegerd, daughter of Sweden's king Olof Eriksson ("skötkonung"). David was one of the participants in the fights

about Yaroslav's inheritance. (There was also another contemporary Rus prince by this name, David, prince of Vladimir-in-Volhynia. The two Davids were cousins).

That our seal should originate from David Svyatoslavytch is only a guess. With a further guess, this David could be related to the enigmatic prince "Anund from Russia" who, according to Adam of Bremen, was summoned to reign Sweden about 1075. This person, perhaps too light-weight politically, disappeared quickly out of sight (Adam av Bremen 1984:194; Larsson 1993:97pp).

There are also other Rus princes one may consider. Among them Gleb, who was christened David, stabbed to death on his brother Svyatoslav's (the Vile) orders in 1015. Gleb, together with his brother Boris who also was killed by Svyatoslav, is among the most loved saints of the Russian orthodox church.

An interpretation

Byzantine and Rus seals are extremely rare in Scandinavia. To my knowledge, the Byzantine seal reported here is the first found in Sweden. From Ribe, Denmark, I know of one seal and from Hedeby (Haithabu), Schleswig (Germany), one. These two are from the 9th century and can be attributed to the same person (Jensen 1991:70; Laurent 1978) (fig. 6). From England one find is known. One find of seal of Rus origin in Sweden is published, it is, however from a far later

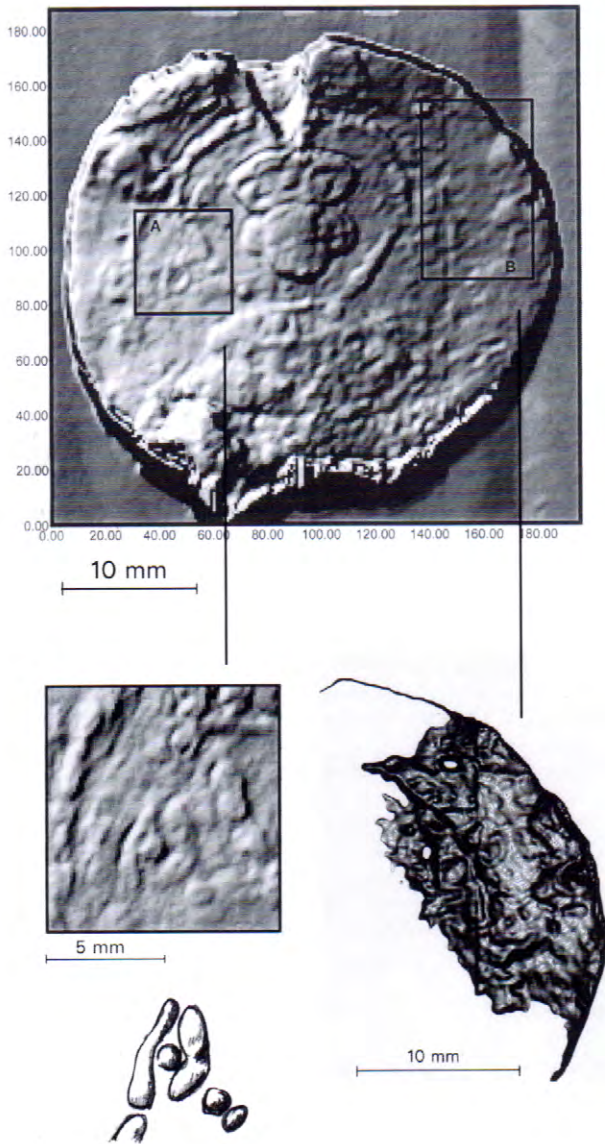


Figure 4. Scanning pictures of the Russian seal (cf. Kitzler 1998).

- a) (top) Shaded Relief. Measuring interval 0.2 mm.
 b) (top left) Shaded Relief. Measuring interval 0.1 mm.
 c) (bottom left) Drawing of detail discernable in the scanning picture above. Another letter or symbol, or is it a part of an ornament?
 d) (right) Topographical map. Measuring interval 0.2 mm. Isarithm 5 µm. An impression, possibly traces of three square shapes of c. 4 mm width in a vertical row. Could the impression be a mark of a tool?

Figure 5. Seal of David Svyatoslavych in Novgorod. After Yanin.



time, 14th century Novgorod (Arne 1932).

I have previously aired a few preliminary ideas on who Cosmas may have been and how the seals found their way to Sigtuna (Edberg 1996, 1997). It is true that goods from Constantinople, especially silk, were sealed with leaden seals (as a sort of custom's seals – an eye witness' account is given by Liutprand of Cremona, see Linnér 1994:136pp; Oikonomides 1986b; also Toynbee 1973pp). But the overwhelming majority of the Byzantine seals were used to seal documents (Schlumberger 1884:11).

The extremely centralised empire's huge administration used seals to verify that the documents sent were genuine. Enormous numbers of orders, reports and other letters were sent around, with the imperial palace in Constantinople as the hub. The great majority of all finds of seals have also been made in the looted and burnt archives in Istanbul. Those seals which have survived appear as "small monuments" (Zacos & Veglery 1972, vol. 1:vii pp) of the once powerful and radiant Byzantine state and its bureaucracy.

After prince Vladimir's baptism in AD 988, Byzantine cultural influence became significant in Rus, and among the habits which were adopted was that of sealing important documents with leaden seals. This use of seals is the only one known from Rus – they were not used to seal other goods, for example. The Rus seal in Sigtuna must, therefore, certainly have been attached to a letter and the two seals, with different provenance but discovered close to each other, may be interpreted as the scattered remnants of a looted or burnt archive.

Both seals have holes made for the cord with which they were once attached to the documents. But no traces of the cord were found in the microscopic examination during preservation (Klockhoff 1997).

A few analogies

If the seals had been attached to letters, what were the letters then about? It is really impossible to say, but one may present a few analogies.

A Norwegian source, Sverres saga, tells us how emperor Alexios III of Constantinople in 1195 sent mes-



Figure 6. Theodosius' seal from Hedeby. After Zacos & Veglery.

sengers to Norway, Denmark and Sweden to recruit soldiers. The messengers, who apparently were Scandinavians (the man sent to king Sverre was called Reidar and he who went to the Danish king was called Peter Ilska. The name of the messenger to king Knut Eriksson in Sweden is not mentioned). The three men were provided with letters with the imperial, golden bull (seal). Alexios demanded each of the Scandinavian kings to send "one thousand first class soldiers" (Sverres saga p. 696).

The previously mentioned Hedeby seal has been attributed by Laurent to one Theodosios whose name is known from historical sources from embassies to the arabs and to Venice. He was a leading official at the imperial authority responsible for the army's arms and equipment. In Laurent's opinion, the most probable explanation of the Hedeby seal is that this Byzantine official had visited the town to recruit soldiers or buy provisions for the army (Laurent 1978).

Among historically known cultural contacts between Byzantium and Sigtuna at that time one may mention Harald Sigurdsson's (hårdråde) arrival in the spring of 1045. Having fled from his native Norway after the battle of Stiklastad (1030), he first served prince Yaroslav in Kiev and then the Byzantine emperor, rose to high rank and collected a fortune. On his way home to Norway, where he was to successfully manoeuvre to become king, he passed Sigtuna where he re-established his old family ties and made new political alliances.

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